

## Teaching Cultural Diversity through Fictional Discourse

**Elena V. Anashkina, PhD**

Associate professor

Department of Foreign languages

Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs

National Research University Higher School of Economics

Moscow, Russia

### Abstract

*Students studying a foreign language find themselves involved into the dialogue between their own culture and that one of the target language. To perform successfully cross-cultural communication they need to develop cross-cultural competence. The task of a foreign language teacher is to help them acquire necessary skills. The article addresses the issue of using fictional discourse as a valuable source to teach cultural diversity as cultural patterns, concepts, symbols and stereotypes are acquired through texts of a particular culture, literary works playing a significant role among them. The focus is on certain comprehensive analysis techniques (linguo-stylistic, conceptual and culturological) of figures of speech, metonymy in particular, which can be applied to decode implicit cultural codes.*

**Key words:** cross-cultural communication, cultural diversity, fictional discourse, figures of speech, metonymy

### 1. Introduction

Close connection between teaching foreign languages and cross-cultural communication is so obvious nowadays that it can hardly be argued. Studying a foreign language is always the penetration into a different cultural dimension acquiring, as a result, more than just vocabulary and grammar rules (Цветкова, 2002, p.110). Every foreign language lesson is a crossroads of cultures and cross-cultural communication experience as every foreign word reflects a culturally specific world perception (Тер-Минасова, 2004). Therefore foreign languages as a means of communication in the modern global world should be studied together with the culture of nations that speak these languages. **The ultimate goal** is to help students develop skills of identifying and interpreting cultural markers which may help to acquire a near-native command of a foreign language. There are a number of tools to achieve this. **The research aim** is to share classroom experience of using fictional discourse for teaching cultural diversity. Approaching material from the perspective of its bilingual perception requires combining traditional linguistic **methods** (descriptive linguo-stylistic analysis), cognitive approach (conceptual analysis) as well as discourse analysis (culturological analysis). The research is based on the experience of analyzing English fictional discourse with Russian-speaking students but the techniques described seem to be universal and applicable for studying any foreign language.

### 2. The interdependence of language and culture

As many linguists have pointed out, language and culture are interdependent. Language externalizes a nation's mentality through the system of peculiar images, symbols and stereotypes and reconstructs particular cultural attitudes and traditions (Гумбольдт, 1984, p. 181). Language, due to its cumulative function, reflects not only current cultural specificity but registers its previous stages thus passing on cultural values from generation to generation (Лютман, 1999, p.21). Therefore culture can be understood and studied through language.

Cultural patterns, concepts, symbols and stereotypes are acquired through texts of a particular culture (its myths, folklore, religious texts and literature) (Опарина, 2000, p.153). Fictional discourse provides a good source of material for studying cultural diversity. Firstly, a literary work directly depicts a national way of life, landscape, local realia, etc. (Белянин, 1996). Secondly, it shows a culturally specific mindset (Тарасов, 2000, p.3). On the whole, fictional discourse reflects cultural diversity at different levels.

On the one hand national specificity is represented through linguistic units. On the other hand an author belonging to a certain culture transforms the national world model through their own perception.

### 3. The role of figures of speech in decoding cultural codes

The analysis of figures of speech selected by authors in fictional discourse contributes to better understanding of cultural diversity. First of all, because an author's stylistic choices are based on the set of images peculiar for their culture (Лотман, 1992, p.168). Besides, figurative meanings contain a certain cultural component in their either denotations or connotations which stands out when compared with corresponding linguistic units of another language (Вежбицкая, 1997/1999, p.267).

#### 3.1. Manifestation of cultural diversity in metonymy

Among various figures of speech used by authors metonymy is of particular interest for decoding implicit cultural codes. In cognitive linguistics metonymy is seen as, alongside with metaphor, a fundamental part of the human conceptual system and one of the ways of reflecting reality in language (Kövecses & Radden, 1998; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Our knowledge is based on the part-whole opposition. As Lakoff (1987) said, "One well-understood or easy-to-perceive aspect of something is used to stand for the thing as a whole or some other aspect or part of it" (p.77). Many metonymic models depend on cultural associations which allow to substitute a thing by something it is conventionally associated with (Gibbs, 1994). Linguo-stylistic and culturological analysis of metonymic models in fictional contexts has shown that they may be classified into three groups in accordance with the cultural component contained:

- metonymic models containing realia
- metonymic models containing cultural concepts
- metonymic models containing cultural connotations

##### 3.1.1. Metonymic models containing realia

Realia are words and expressions which denote culturally specific material things (e.g. geographic objects, ethnographic items, social and political names) (Влахов & Флорин, 1986). They are explicitly culturally marked and unique, generally without equivalents in other languages. To decode their implicit meanings and to understand the author's message it is not enough to know only the facts about the objects realia denote. A detailed analysis of the extra-linguistic information is required for interpreting a whole complex of national, historic, social as well as other associations with these realia which exist in the collective consciousness. The aforesaid is particularly true for toponyms (a general term for the names of any places – from major geographic areas to small city objects) (*English-Russian dictionary of linguistics and semiotics*, 2002, p. 366). A toponym can metonymically refer to a situation according to a common metonymic model "the place for the event". The information contained in a toponym presents a compressed text (Ирисханова, 1978) and when used in fictional discourse a toponym becomes stylistically marked serving as a means to produce a certain effect on the reader. The following example from Somerset Maugham's story "The Lotus Eater", in which the character tells his companion about his wife, illustrates how extracting extra-linguistic information from the toponyms helps to appreciate and enjoy the subtleties of the undertones:

*She didn't like travelling. Eastbourne was her idea of a holiday. D'you know, I'd never crossed the Channel till after her death (*English story*, 2000, p. 247).*

Eastbourne is an English seaside resort conveniently situated not far from London which was extremely popular among the English aristocrats and the bourgeois in the 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The toponym characterizes the woman who is concerned about other people's opinions and for whom it is important to visit places having an established reputation and approved by her peers. It may also indirectly hint at her conservatism and traditionalism as English people are known for their rather reserved attitude to anything foreign (*The English world: history, character and people*, 1982). By contrast, the expression with the toponym "to cross the Channel" (to go to the Continent) indicates that the woman's husband would prefer to go on holiday somewhere abroad. Thus, we can guess about a certain discord between the spouses.

### 3.1.2. Metonymic models containing cultural concepts

Culture in its bearers' minds exists as a set of cultural concepts and relations among them. A cultural concept is a cluster of ideas, notions, knowledge, associations and connotations which surround a certain aspect of a culture for its bearers (Степанов, 1997, p. 78). In all cultures there are universal cultural concepts which may as well be common for different cultures but still are not identical. They are hierarchically structured forming a new configuration in different cultures (Вежбицкая, 1997/1999). In every culture there are also specific and unique cultural concepts.

Such universal concepts as «Home» and «House» belonging to the most important constants in British culture will have distinct national features. The conceptual analysis of these concepts in fictional discourse helps to gain access to non-obvious meanings as the following example illustrates:

*[...] something happened which threw out many of Mr. Brewer's calculations, took away his ablest young fellows, and eventually, so prying and insidious were the fingers of the European War, smashed a plaster cast of Ceres, ploughed a hole in the geranium beds, and utterly ruined the cook's nerves at Mr. Brewer's establishment at Muswell Hill (Woolf, 1984, p.105).*

In this extract World War I is metonymically referred to through the ravages it caused. The damages are enumerated in parallel syntactic constructions, each new damage being emotionally more intensified. The aftermath of the war affected the character as it ruined his house and home and shattered the routine lifestyle.

A particular attitude of English people to their home and house is expressed even in the proverb "An Englishman's home is his castle" (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of proverbs*, 1982, p. 89). Benjamin Disraeli, a famous English statesman and writer of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, wrote "England is a domestic country: here home is revered and the heart is sacred (*Dictionary of quotations from ancient and modern English and foreign sources*, 1893, p. 82). The main features of the concepts "Home" and "House" are their security and safety. The cluster of meanings and connotations of these concepts goes back to their etymology. The underlying stem of the English word "home" derives from the Anglo-Saxon root "hām" related to the kindred Dutch words "heim", "heimelijk" ("private, secret") (Skeat, 1958, p. 275). The word "house" goes back to the Indo-European root "keudh" ("to hide") (ibid., p. 279). Moreover, the analysis of the underlying metaphors (long forgotten in the modern language) has shown that the house originally was a temple where Druids worshipped their deities, i.e. was a place closed for ordinary people (Маковский, 1999, p. 177). The invaders from Europe brought to the British Isles their own vision of the house as a secure place surrounded by dangers and fears (Гуревич, 1984, p. 58) which overlapped the indigenous idea and eventually led to the modern perception of the home and the house as something close, separate and impenetrable.

But the war crept into the houses and homes of middle-class English people and broke customs and traditions. The smashed plaster cast of Ceres, the goddess of agriculture in Roman mythology, symbolizes the ruined peaceful life. The damaged geranium beds indicate that the habitual stability has been undermined. It should be mentioned that the concept "Garden" is closely connected with the concepts "House" and "Home" in British culture. Moreover, geranium is considered a traditional "bourgeois" garden plant (Chetwynd, 1982, p. 214). The cook's ruined nerves may indirectly betoken that the woman is too frustrated to perform her duties properly. Therefore, another support of the comfortable and regular life has teetered. Thus, identification of cultural specificity through the conceptual analysis allows to get to the core of the author's message.

### 3.1.3. Metonymic models containing cultural connotations

Words in native speakers' minds carry an extra semantic load alongside with their dictionary meaning (Комлев, 1992, p. 51). Behind words there is a cluster of information and associations referred to as lexical background (Верещагин & Костомаров, 1983, p. 57) which is familiar to all native speakers and reflects cultural diversity. Allusions, implications and underlying messages remain submerged without knowing and analyzing the lexical background based on background knowledge. Thus, every naming unit is surrounded by a certain connotative field defined as emotional, attitudinal or stylistic colouring of a word (*English-Russian dictionary of linguistics and semiotics*, 2002, p. 78). Some words become obviously culturally marked if their connotations are brought into correlation with particular cultural codes (Телия, 1996, p. 214). Being able to extract and interpret cultural connotations in fictional discourse equips the reader with knowledge about the mentality of native speakers. The following example shows how cultural connotations can be decoded:

*He [Hugh Whitbread] had married this lady, the Honourable Evelyn [...]. She was one of those obscure mouse-like little women who admire big men. She was almost negligible. Then suddenly she would say something quite unexpected – something sharp. She had the relics of grand manner, perhaps. The steam coal was a little too strong for her – it made the atmosphere thick (Woolf, 1984, p.94).*

Previously in the novel we read that Hugh Whitbread's ancestors used to be coal merchants therefore the underlined word combination "*the steam coal*" metonymically stands for Hugh Whitbread hinting at his social origin. Cultural connotations of the word "*coal*" can be explained historically. Coal used to be one of England's main natural resources and play an important role in the country's economy even before the Industrial revolution (1780-1830) and especially during that period (*The English World*, 1982, p. 216). Coal merchants used to be the richest people in the country. To achieve a certain status and power they conveniently married into impoverished aristocratic families. Aristocrats, though, treated merchants with arrogance and disdain. In the example provided such a case is illustrated. The character, Hugh, married Evelyn, a girl from an aristocratic family, which is explicitly expressed in the text as well as the fact that the marital life was not cloudless. But the reasons for this and Evelyn's real attitude to Hugh can be fully understood only after decoding cultural connotations which surround the word "*coal*".

#### 4. Conclusions

The conducted research was based on the assumption that fictional discourse can be used in the classroom as an effective way of applying authentic material to understanding another culture. Since students are linguistically immature and often lack background knowledge relevant for the culture of the foreign language they study, cultural information contained in fictional discourse as well as the underlying message are likely to be lost on them. Developing in students skills of careful reading and in-depth analysis of both linguistic and extra-linguistic information gradually helps to properly appreciate another culture. Being able to grasp all relevant implications in an authentic literary work gives a satisfying feeling, helps to polish general knowledge of a foreign language and is rewarding for both the teacher and the student.

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